I am Zuul. I am the Gatekeeper.

We fervently wanted to believe Zool (or Pootz or Zoon as he was tentatively titled) was destined to be the second coming (of Sonic the Hedgehog, not Christ I should add), and the reviewers had already made their minds up that all was rosy in the garden of ninjas. The crucial ingredients were all there, it looked the part, so what went wrong for the forlorn superhero that wasn't? Join me, the 'Mildly Disgruntled Video Game Nerd' on a pilgrimage of discovery as we traverse the Nth dimension in search of clues.
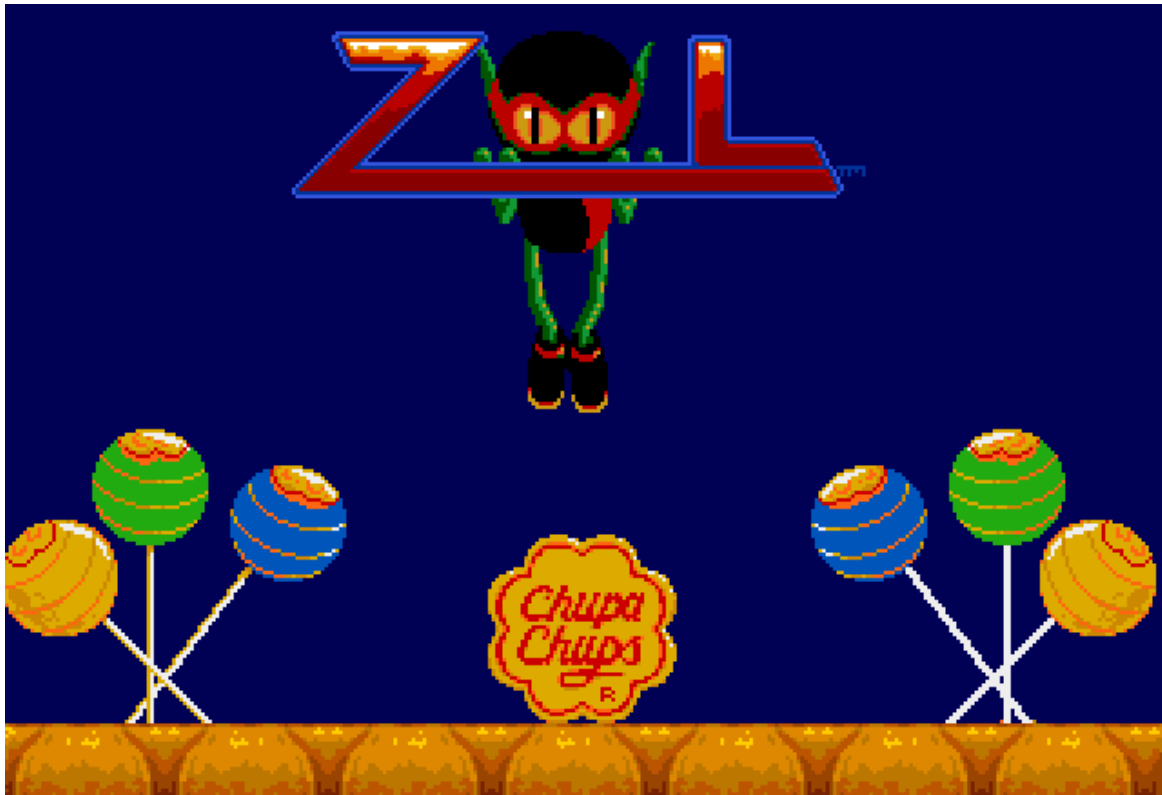
Shortly after Sonic took the world by storm, inevitably rumours with regards to who would acquire the rights to convert it for the Amiga began to circulate. Publishers would have been willing to sell their grannies in a heartbeat to be bestowed with the honour.

U.S. Gold actually announced at one point that *they'd* won the race, though no port ever materialised from their studios since the Japanese developers swiftly reneged on the deal opting instead to make Sonic a SEGA-exclusive title and adopt the character as their mascot to help shift more games console units. It's safe to say this story had a happy ending for them; during the 1991 holiday season, the MEGA Drive sold at twice the rate of Nintendo's competing console, and SEGA claimed 65% of the 16-bit market by January 1992.

Incidentally, the ADF floppy image purporting to be the 'work in progress' of U.S. Gold's Sonic port for the Amiga has been outed as a fake made by a demo scene group. Had the genuine article been released at the time, perhaps Zool wouldn't have existed at all.
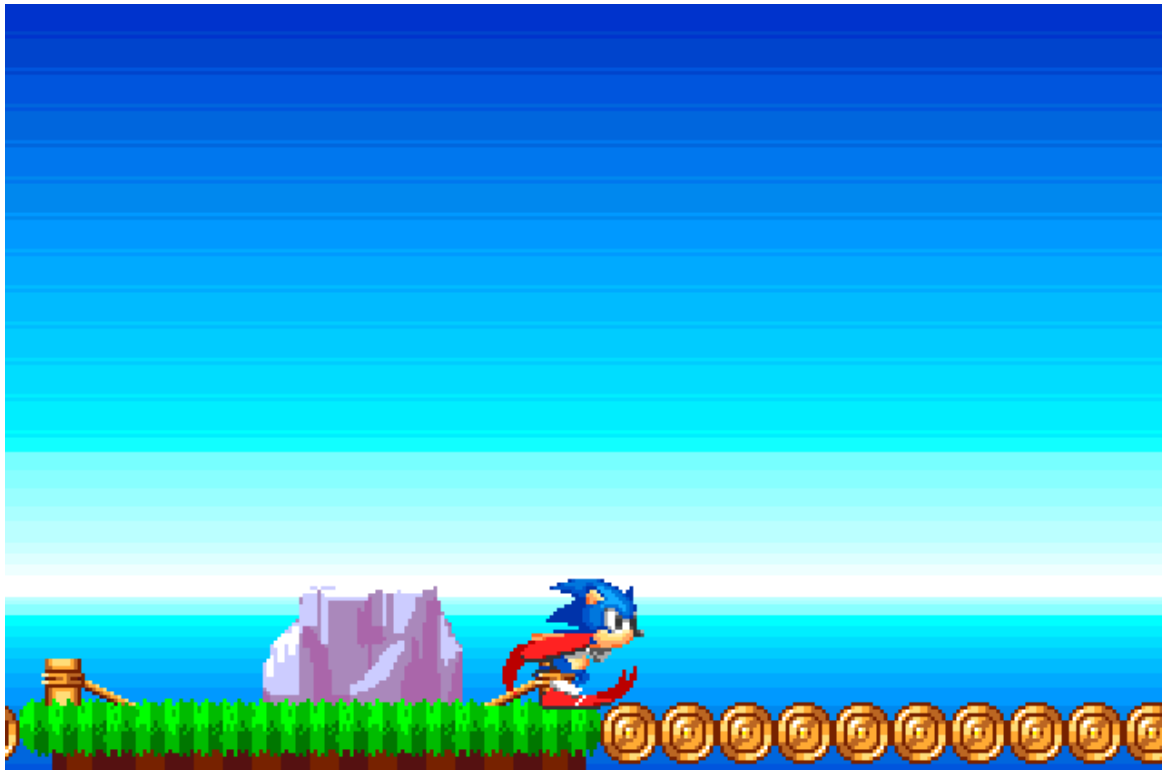
Zool, the 1992 Sonic-bothering, ninja platform game developed initially for the Amiga by Gremlin Graphics, began life as a tech demo designed to showcase the capabilities of the new Switchblade II engine upon which the game is built. Not that this would ever be apparent given how radically different the two are. The potential for Switchblade II to scroll at breakneck speeds was always inherent to the code base, yet simply wasn't called for with a game of this nature, thus the boundaries were never pushed. For better or worse, Zool added level compression to the existing engine, and changed all that.
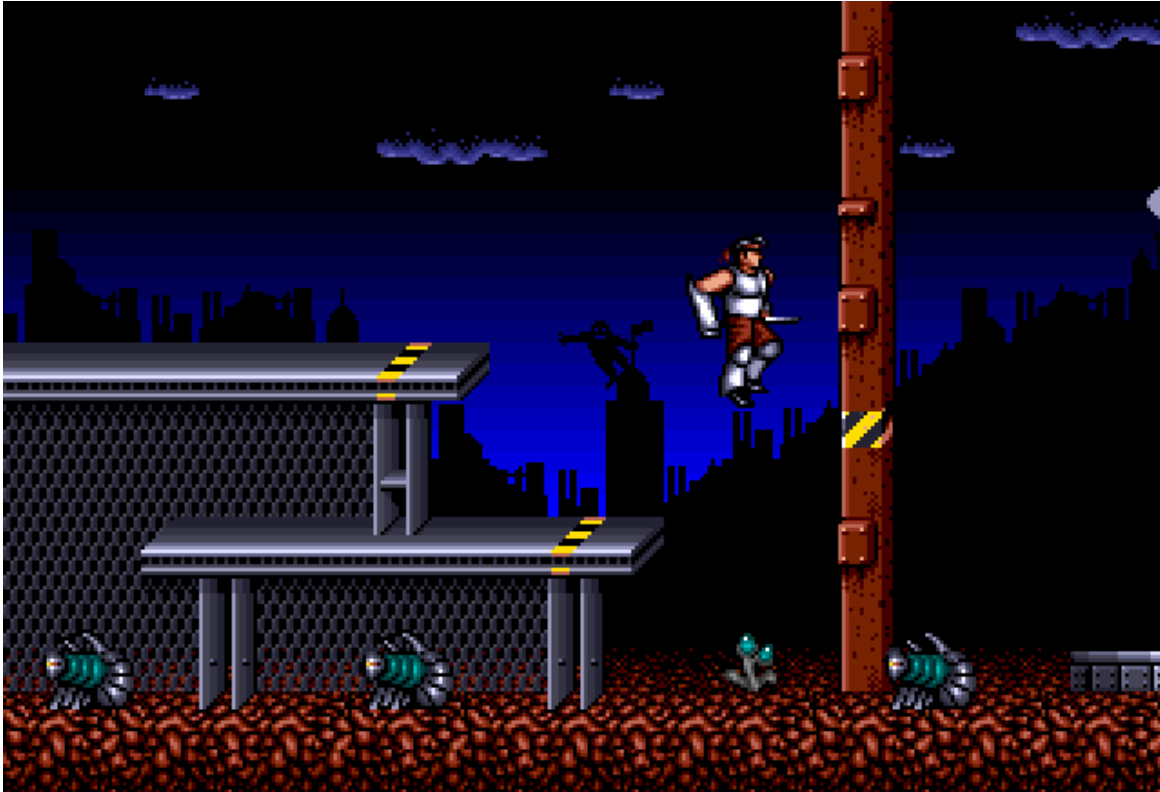
"It's just a simple collection game really, mainly inspired by Mario. I'm not even sure I'd played Sonic by that point." - Zool programmer, George Allan

By adopting the ninja motif, Gremlin's goal appears to have been to piggyback the craze set in motion in the US with the attitude-laden Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles cartoon. In the UK at least, ninjas were still a controversial topic as the censorship of the show's title will attest. Here they were rebranded as 'hero' turtles to protect the delicate sensibilities of the nation's youth, who as a direct result of TV network-nannying grew up to be well-rounded individuals with successful, productive and happy lives... probably.

As it happened, the concept dovetailed neatly as a retaliatory counter to the marketing campaign SEGA were running at the time to promote the Sonic the Hedgehog Mega Drive bundle. This starred a cool teenager (played by Peter Wingfield) replete with 90s fashionably floppy haircut, effortlessly deflecting the malevolent advances of a ninja.

Zool sorely wanted to be the irreverent ninja that turned the tables on this SEGA shill and knock Sonic off his swaggering stride. If in the process Gremlin flogged a few branded t-shirts and badges, who were they to stand in the way of a potential marketing juggernaut? Plotted on a sliding scale, *everything* has potential of course.

That said, it's true that Zool managed to outsell Sonic 2 on the Mega Drive upon its release, and the critics were almost unanimous in showering it with glowing praise. One deranged reviewer went as far as awarding the knock-off 97%, claiming that Zool is "one of most original games I've seen on the Amiga, and knocks the socks off Sonic" (Ben Styles of Amiga Computing magazine). Clearly he was high on Gremlin's Zoolade at the time.

RR Classic Sonic vs Zool by Vexikku

Not one to miss a marketing opportunity, Gremlin arranged for a specially devised level of Zool to be featured as a challenge on the TV show, GamesMaster. Despite the tenacious efforts of a number of die-hard Zool fans, the whereabouts of this code has never been ascertained.

Nevertheless, a GamesMaster bonus room *did* make it into the final game released to retailers. If you bash your way through a false sweet-pocked wall in the first level you'll discover a cavernous throng of clocks and various other collectables arranged to spell out 'GamesMaster', plus a couple of extra lives.
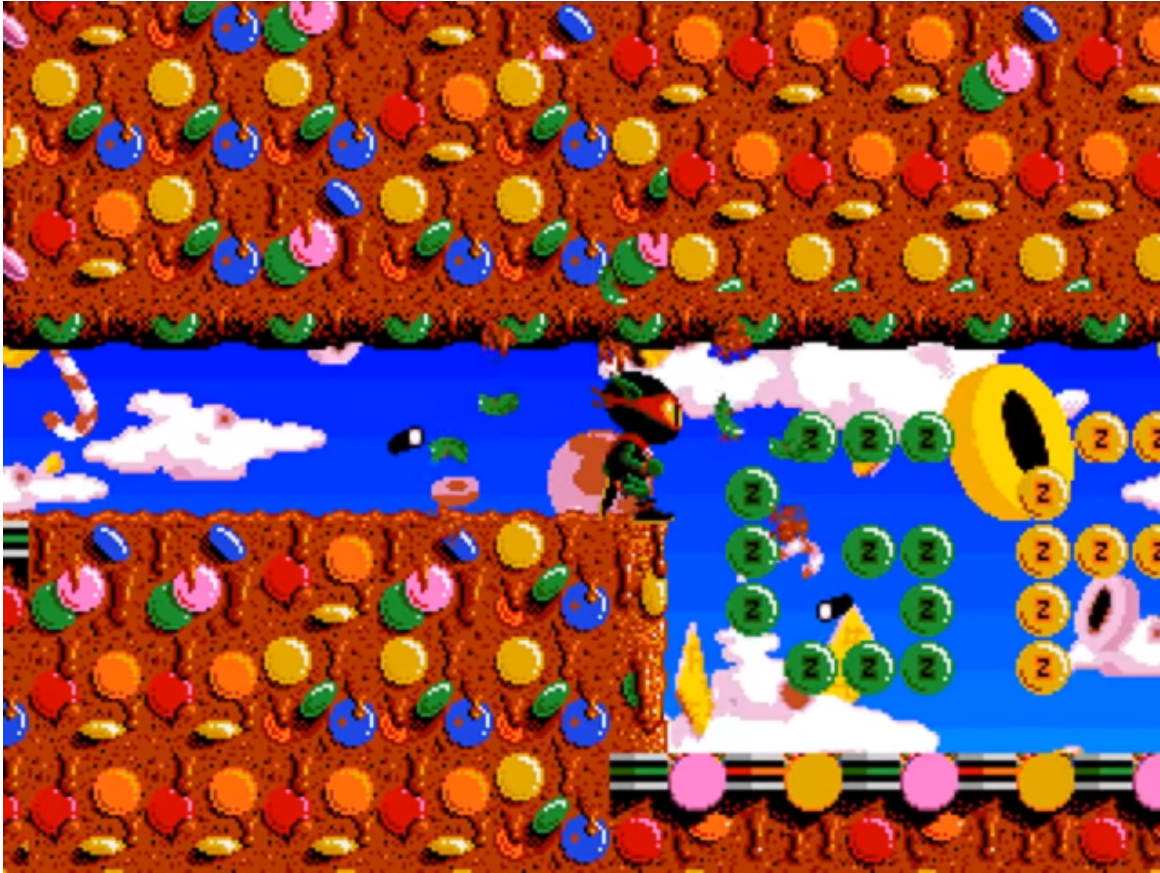
Commodore was patently convinced that Gremlin had hit the jackpot with Zool so commissioned them to produce a custom, special edition to be included in the inaugural CD32 pack. Nevertheless, as it was only 40% complete three months away from the console's release, the Diggers and Oscar were drafted in to represent the brand instead. Regrettably, they left a lot to be desired as the ambassadors it sorely needed to establish the CD32 as a viable 32-bit platform for the future.

WELCOME, MASTER MINER

OSCAR.
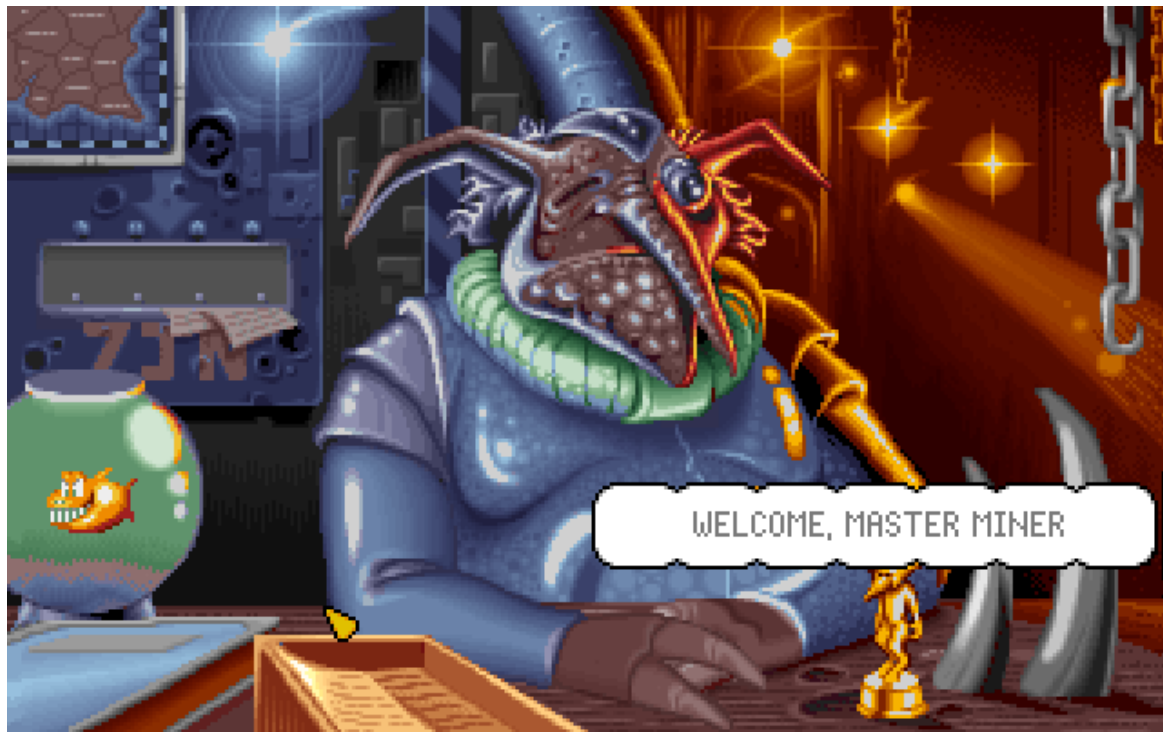
In Spring 1994, the Amiga 1200 won the consolation prize; Zool 2 was bundled with the 'Computer Combat' pack. Better late than never I suppose.

Much to Gremlin's chagrin, from the outset, all the major Amiga publications began referring to Zool as an ant. The manual calls him an "interstellar cosmos dweller from the Nth dimension" and as far as we know, no prior press releases had been issued to the contrary, yet there was a complete consensus with regards to his supposed genus.

If you deliberately set out to devise a slick caricature of an ant with that obligatory 90s attitude kids were told they aspire to, without worrying too much about the accuracy of its anatomy, number of legs, antennae and so on, it probably *would* look a lot like Zool, so maybe the critics had a point.

Designer, Ade Carless, really didn't help his cause to be honest.

"The Zool sprite is composed of two basic geometric spheroids (not all that dissimilar to an *ant*!) and based on the stripped-down guise of Bomberman, though with exaggeratedly expressive feline-like eyes. These minimalistic building blocks ensured animating the character within the confines of a 48 pixels x 48 pixels canvas was kept as manageable as possible."
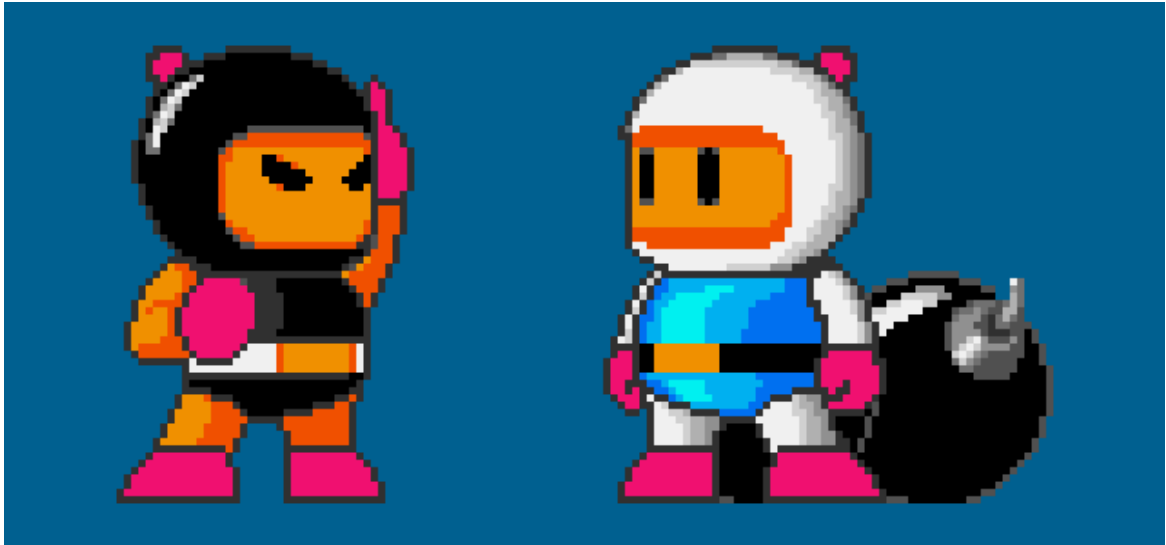
Gremlin explicitly set out to establish Zool as the Amiga's mascot, our antidote to SEGA's Sonic and Nintendo's Mario, yet without pausing for breath diluted their argument by porting it to every popular platform in the known universe... plus the Acorn Archimedes.

As reported in Edge and Amiga Format, there were even *plans* to transform Zool into a coin-op arcade game. Despite a prototype being showcased on the gaming/technology TV show, Bad Influence, that's all they ever amounted to. Perhaps this was for the best; imagine what a coin-guzzler *that* would have been!

Zool at the arcade

Amiga owners have known for months that Zool is good enough to be an arcade machine, but now Bell Fruit Manufacturing have caught on to the fact too.

Summer 1993 will see the Ninja mut-ant kicking and spinning his way across many a seafront and town centre arcade, as the Zool coin-op is launched.

Play will strongly resemble the Amiga version, but additional features will be incorporated, including over 100 levels of arcade action. If you've finished the computer version, start saving those 50 pence pieces.

Amiga Format issue 46 (May 1993)

*Ask YouTube 'what happened to the Zool arcade coin-op game?'
and you may well find some further relevant details.*

How were we supposed to strut onto the playground to boast that
the Amiga is superior to the Mega Drive and SNES since we have
the Amiga-exclusive, Zool, if it was *also* available for their shoddy
kiddy consoles? As it happened, we needn't have worried as few
of us outside of the magazine circuit embraced the character as
the platform's ambassador, so the issue never really arose.

The game opens with an animated title screen accompanied by a
chirpy oriental ditty reminiscent of the one heard in IK+, followed
by a scatter-gun, rapid-fire menagerie of incongruous sound
effects including a crowing cock and shattering glass. In the
same vein, throughout the game you'll hear the beat of Zool's
heart, snoring and a duck quacking whenever he's hit. If I had to
describe the ostensible mood in a single word, I'd plump for
'incoherent'. Not that this is necessarily a *bad* thing; I'm a big fan
of random nonsense. Life's short.

Technically Zool is exceedingly impressive; it features smooth, psychedelic, lush parallax backgrounds, full-screen multi-scrolling and - given the chance - runs faster than a blue hedgehog with dynamite strapped to his tail.

Speed has always been a contentious issue for Zool in that it was the blueprint's headliner, yet is rarely fully realised since the levels are so cluttered with progress-hindering obstacles (most of which are of the spikey variety - hedgehog phobia?), and unlike Sonic, Zool cannot tear up the scenery at the speed of light without incurring show-stopping damage.

In the options menu there's a toggle that allows you to ramp up the speed even further as though this is something anyone in their right mind would have requested.

More useful tweaks include the ability to turn off inertia if that's a bone of contention for you, adjust the difficulty level and the number of continues at your disposal.
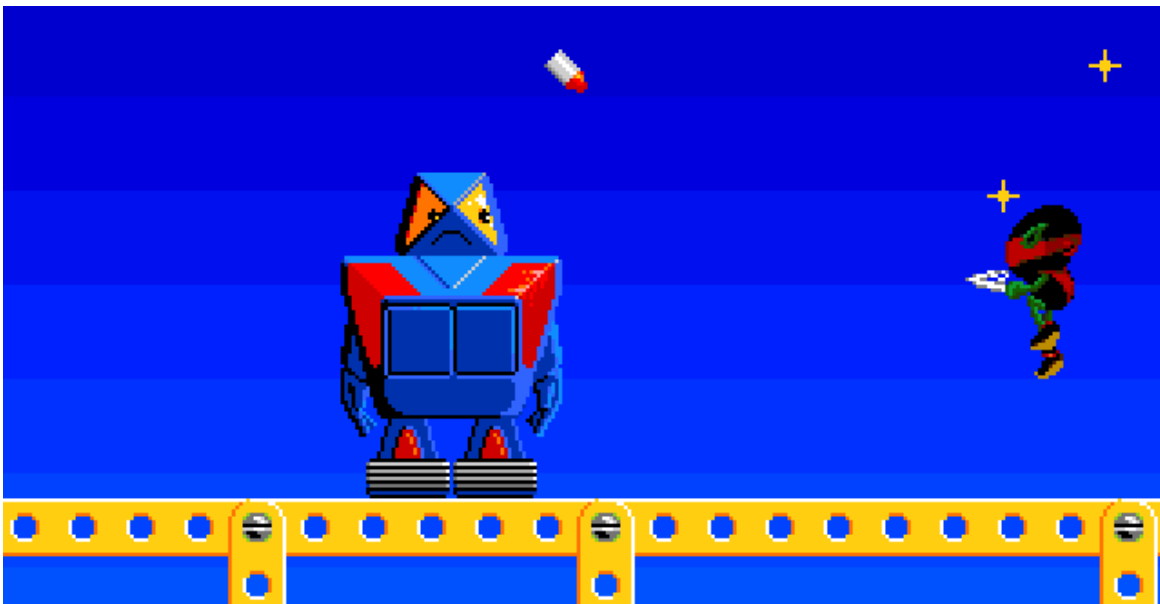
Incipiently Zool was to have the ability to roll into a spinning ball as a means of attack, nevertheless, through fear of litigation this

was left on the cutting room floor, and replaced with a spinning sword manoeuvre and a shuriken fireball.

Rather than a Sonic clone, what we are left with is a schizophrenic, doddery knick-knack collection game that can't decide if it should grab a trolly and apply to take part in Supermarket Sweep, or keep moving to stay one step ahead of the eccentric parade of miscellaneous adversaries.

The Zool character himself is brought to life beautifully with no less than 80 frames of animation, including deftly charming touches such as the way he teeters precariously on the edge of platforms in an attempt to regain his balance. Idle animations and similar fare had already been established as a platforming

trope in 1993, nonetheless, when they are executed with such panache, it still has the clout to make you beam from ear to ear.

Someone at Gremlin clearly forgot to put the discussion of a potential plot on the agenda given that what there is, constitutes little more than an incumbent afterthought. In no dimension in the known universe does it make the faintest glimmer of sense.

Zool on his way back from a spot of ninja-ing is sucked into a vortex, loses control of his spaceship and crash lands in the kooky Lalaland in which you currently find yourself.

To get back to the Nth dimension and your Alien Ant Farm brood, you must plough through six perfunctory and disjointed themed levels collecting all manner of random jumble bric-a-brac. I tried connecting the dots, and the result looks uncannily like a pink blancmange with an upturned giraffe poking out the top in lieu of a Cadbury's flake.

Zool's environment consists of six themed zones (*seven* in the CD32 version), each split into three levels, climaxing with an end of stage guardian. These tend to be unimaginative, scaled-up renditions of theme-appropriate sprites or environmental 'furniture' you've previously encountered. For instance, a Liquorice Allsort bee, cactus, robot, pneumatic drill and a banana. They're not the most predictable adversaries kinetically speaking, so beating them boils down to a composite of persistent button-bashing and avoidance tactics.

It's the standard fare we have come to expect from late-in-the-day platformers; there's a sweet, music, tool, fruit, toy and fairground world, all of which have been scattered with random associated paraphernalia like confetti at a wedding. Regrettably, 'random' does seem to be a recurring theme in that little thought appears to have gone into the level design, placement or volume of objects or foes. It's a slapdash assault to the senses.

Perplexingly, the particulars of each and every boss, minor adversary and level theme are unveiled sequentially in the game's manual. Possibly I should have prefaced this expose with a spoiler warning? Oh well, it's too late now.

Nonetheless, one of Zool's saving graces is its innovative deployment of bonus sub-games. In the most fondly remembered of these you get to grapple with a jumbo arcade cabinet in an effort to boost your lives quota. On the screen-within-a-screen, your doppelganger runs automatically across the landscape whilst you stomp on oversized fire buttons, instructing the ant in the mirror to leap over spikes or shoot at baddies.

Similarly, in music world you can channel Tom Hanks in the movie, Big, by bouncing on the keys of a giant piano... and not purely for the sake of bashing out a hammy rendition of the Green Hill Zone theme, as much fun as that would obviously be.

If you hit them in a specified sequence you are rewarded with access to hidden bonus rooms. Helpfully, the order in which you play the notes is elucidated in a nearby area by the presence of colour-coded octaves, making random trial and error unnecessary.

Also in the music world, there's an innocuous-looking void you can leap into to be teleported to a spaceship bonus stage where you must decussate what appears to be the innards of a bloody artery. It's a horizontally scrolling homage to archetypal shoot-em-ups, clouds serving as front-mounted shields much like 'The Force' as found in R-Type.

Inventive sub-games make a welcome comeback in Zool 2 where your sprite is transformed into a giant Arkanoid paddle and swiped back and forth across the screen to bat a ball into the

destructible bricks above. This being a Zool retrospective, however, I'll refrain from mentioning it...
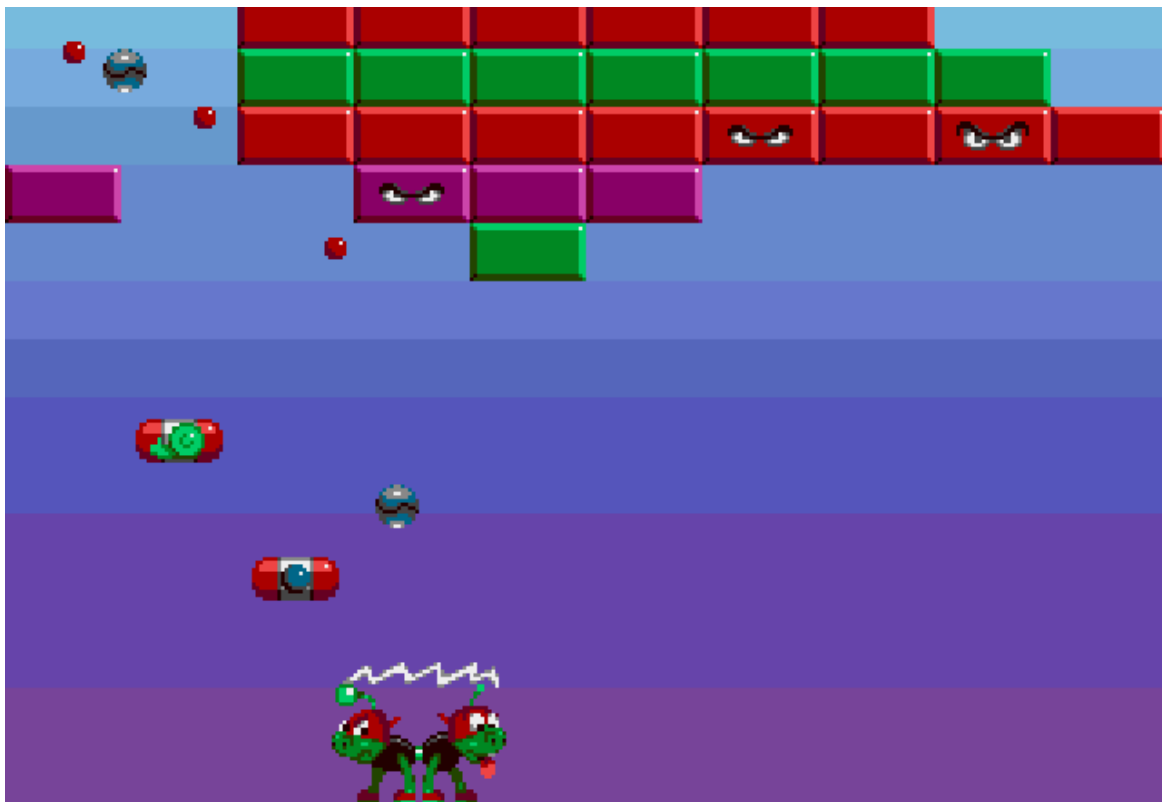
To activate the end of stage Zool 'token' that lets you progress to the next level, you must stockpile a predetermined percentage of collectable tat. The exact percentage is based on the difficulty level you selected in the options menu before you commenced the game. This is littered throughout the levels making them look like a post-match Old Trafford, ultimately detracting from the gameplay that's desperately trying to burst loose from the irrepressible avalanche.

Even when you dispatch a baddie, they implode, releasing yet more random, collectable guff. Fair enough, these can also include wing-powered hearts that replenish your energy reserves, so they're not *all* useless. Incidentally, these are the same fluttering hearts that appear in Gremlin's earlier game, Venus the Flytrap, which George Allan also worked on. A far more aesthetically pleasing game in many ways, not least because it values subtlety.

On completion of a zone we're treated to an animated display of roundhouse kicks and other flamboyant ninjary shenanigans, usually involving Zool holding what look to be either drum sticks or light sabres, neither of which strike me as being expressly associated with the dark arts. Is he suffering from some kind of dissociative personality disorder? Maybe Adrian's dojo had closed down for the night and these were the closest weapons to katanas in the vicinity? Never mind, these renders are so beautifully sculptured and animated I'll hold off on reporting him to the FBI's Retro Gaming Origin Story Authenticity Department.
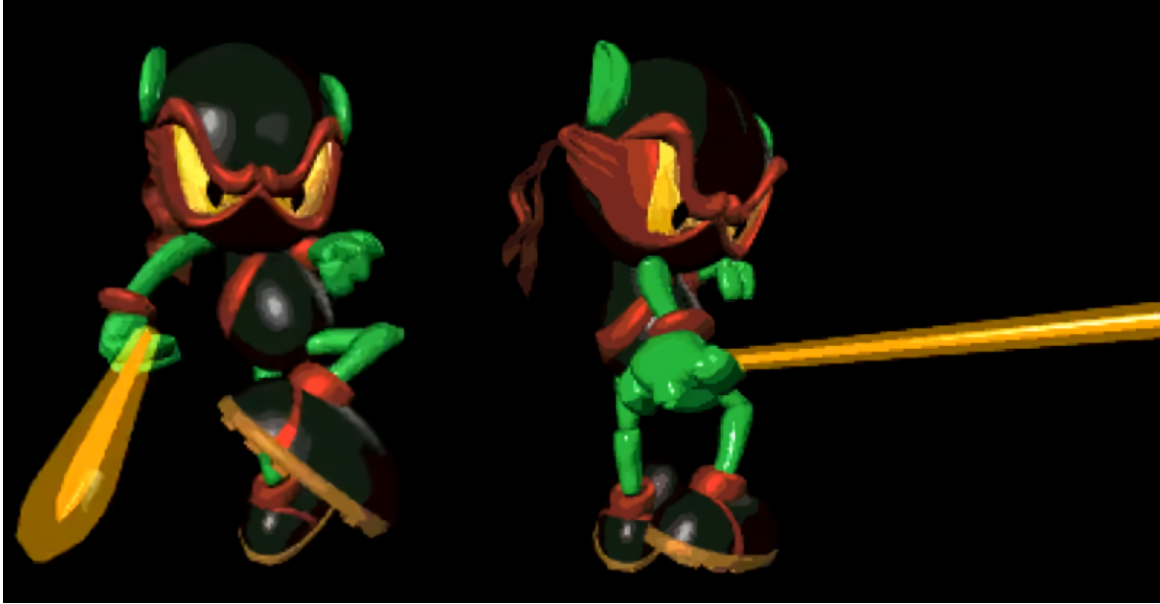
Zorro - I mean *Zool,* sorry - has a number of useful power-ups at his disposal to ease his passage through Bizarroworld.

Snap up a yin-yang symbol on your travels and the titular hero splits in two, each representation mirroring the others' movements. Every sword-slash and every fireball is duplicated, making combat half as tough, and you dizzier than Taylor Swift.

For anyone who suffers from migraine aura this will scare the hell out of you since it simulates the condition too accurately for comfort. If gobbling all those sweet treats doesn't make you throw up, this 'upgrade' may well push you over the edge.

The double protagonist trick can also be seen in the Japanese Mega Drive game Doraemon (released March 26, 1993), based on the massively popular cutesy blue cat cartoon of the same name.
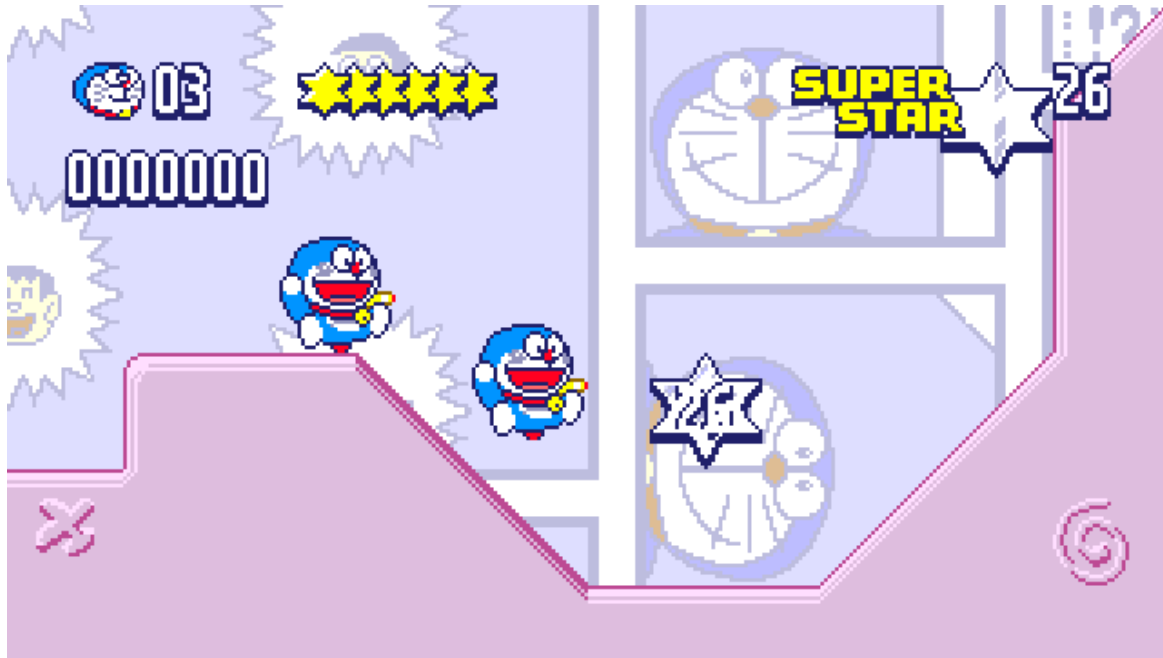
I think it's unlikely that George and Ade would have been aware of this obscure title at the time (or perhaps even now), but I think it's an interesting parallel, and I'd be curious to know how common the notion of a character-split power-up was at that stage.

Originally Zool was going to deploy his special abilities or weapons (the high jump, smart bomb, body double gimmick - known officially as the 'twozool' - and temporary shield of invincibility) by casting spells, though the means of activation was later switched to collectable power-ups. Perhaps because he's a ninja, and *not* Gandalf the sorcerer? Just a thought.

If I could command the ring, the power would pass to me!

The pace begins all very sedately, offering you a fair, smooth ride; beyond zone two, however, the difficulty curve quickly descends into madness to the extent that the game becomes unwinnable, you eject the disk in disgust and stomp off to play a BBC Micro edutainment title featuring a floating, talking Hoover instead.

The most salient factor in this is perhaps the enemy's penchant for regenerating as soon as you move away from their original positions, and then return. It does leave you wondering if there's any point in bumping them off in the first place if they're only going to do a 'Groundhog Day' number on you at the first opportunity.

What constitutes a checkpoint varies with each theme so they can be easily missed if you don't make a habit of punching everything you encounter just in case. For example, in music land, remote controls serve as checkpoints, though to confuse matters some of them whilst looking identical to genuine checkpoints are actually just part of the background.

The game is similarly unbalanced in that whilst the controls are generally tight and responsive, the collision detection sometimes lets it down, leading you to concede unfair health hits... and fashion Gremlin-shaped voodoo dolls out of toilet rolls, washing up bottles and sticky back plastic.

Acoustically, Zool earns at least three and a bit Brownie Points for its variety alone. *You* are in control of the jukebox; from the options menu it's possible to choose rock, rave, funk or 'green' (don't ask) compositions, plus simultaneous sound effects if you're playing the CD32 version. If not, you'd choose one or the other; a redundant throwback to a time when it was believed the Amiga wasn't capable of blending the two effectively.

To accompany the rave track you'll find smiley-happy 'acid' faces oscillating rapidly back and forth in the level-complete interstitial screens. Promoting the drug-fuelled rave scene alongside lollipops and kiddie toys was a novel idea on Gremlin's part I thought!
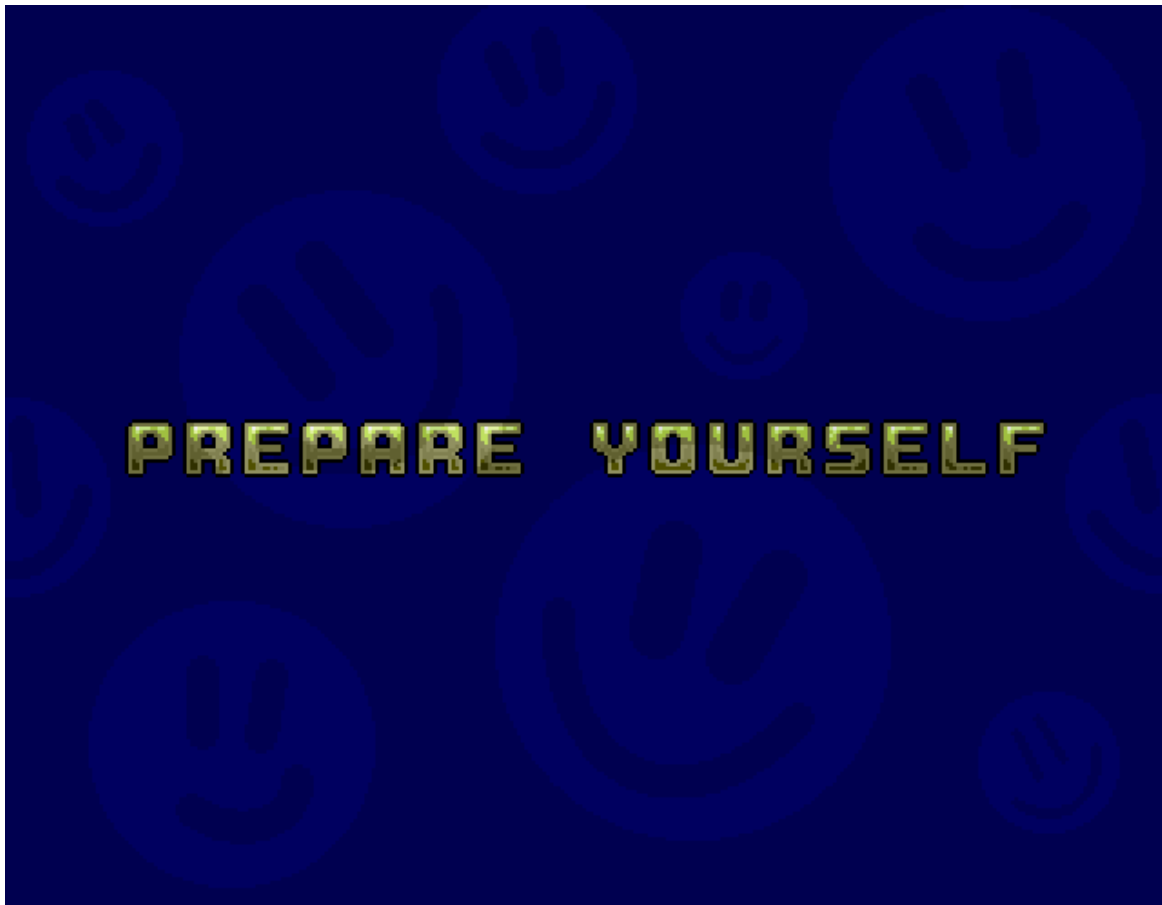
Note that you can't change the soundtrack having commenced the game, so make sure you choose wisely at this stage.

Trivia time! Patrick Phelan, the musician behind Zool's 'out-there' acoustics was also responsible for the music featured in Gremlin's Lotus Turbo Challenge III. Acknowledging his contribution to Zool, the latter showcased a track called 'Space Ninja'.

Clearly Gremlin had been paying close attention to Millennium's collaboration with McVitie's and wanted a piece of the 'polly' (that's a portmanteau of pie and lolly... and sounded a lot more clevererer in my head. I'll edit this out later and you'll be none the wiser).

Given that Zool, like RoboCod, would be targeted principally at kids, Gremlin thought it made sense to stick with the sweet confectionery theme, thus approached the Spanish lollipop company, Chupa Chups, upturned cap and a guitar in hand. The rest, as they say, is hist... product placement.

The name of the Chupa Chups brand comes from the Spanish verb 'chupar', meaning "to lick or to suck". I won't say any more - I wish that homophobic phrase had never escaped from the depressingly unenlightened '70s.

Chupa Chups logos (designed in 1969 by artist Salvador Dali, fact fans!) and lollipops are strewn throughout the first (sweet) world, and are also prominent in the title screen. Considering the unforgiving difficulty of the game, this makes sense; for many players this would have been as much as they ever experienced.

In RoboCod, the Penguin biscuits made sense in that they utterly complemented the game's plot, setting and themes. Here the branding sticks out like a sore thumb and feels like a me-too cash-grab. The fact that Zool *has* no coherent plot or themes doesn't remotely help Gremlin's cause.

Irrespective of any bad will this may have caused amongst the core audience, both parties must have been satisfied with the results since they renewed their partnership for Zool's second outing.

In 2013, Wired acknowledged this landmark collusion with their article, '12 Games That Existed Just to Sell You Junk Food'.

The curtain closes on this brain-mashing assault on the senses with a final FMV sequence depicting Zool - now back in his magically repaired spaceship - returning to his home planet with

no indication as to how our tortuous ordeal helped him accomplish this.

Everything is neatly wrapped up with a screen of text amounting to, "cheers for your help, now get your wallet ready for Zool 2" starring Zool (obviously), his nemesis Krool (plus sidekick, Mental Block) and girlfriend, Zooz. It sounds suspiciously like the sequel might include one of those elusive plot doodars!

WELL DONE

ZOOL HAS RETURNED
TO HIS HOMELAND AND
HIS LOVING FAMILY

THANK YOU

PLAYER ONE CHOOSE...

In the original finale of the Amiga version, we would have got to enjoy an animation of Zool kicking a blue hedgehog (who shall remain nameless) out of the way as he races to get home to his estranged family, though the scene was cut from the final epilogue.

In light of the 1992 lead SKU's success, Zool was ported to... well, everything with a chip really, the following year. Given the disparate capabilities of the hardware involved, the various ports were imbued with certain nuances.

The Amiga CD32 version boasts original red book audio tracks composed by Neil Biggin, and further supports the option to serenade us with both sound effects and music simultaneously. If we dexterously pretend the Acorn Archimedes port doesn't exist, we can safely assert this killer feature is unique to the CD32 incarnation, and feel acutely smug about our chosen platform's superior capabilities.

Over in big beige box land, the DOS version is largely a faithful conversion of the original, though doesn't feature background gradient effects as found in the OCS/ECS Amiga edition.

SNES owners - had they been able to tear themselves away from playing Mario - would have noticed that their port includes multiple levels of parallax scrolling, wall-climbing rather than the awkward jump-ascent mechanism we Amigans endured, and simultaneous music and sound effects.

Smaller protagonist sprites appear in the SNES and Mega Drive ports, and less vertical screen real estate is available, making leaps of faith a recurring quandary. Nevertheless, any fans of the intergalactic insect shouldn't have felt too short-changed by his console brethren.

Both of the 16-bit console editions went back to the drawing board where map layouts are concerned and also incorporated entirely new visuals, for example, the impressive rolling clouds in the backdrops of certain levels.

Full parallax scrolling is substituted with less processor-intensive copper background effects in the OCS/ECS Amiga version. Counter-intuitively this actually *enhances* the player's

experience as we are able to discern the foreground from the background, and reduce the likelihood of blacking out from optical overload syndrome (a term coined soon after Zool's release to explain the bizarre health problems experienced by gamers).

When you consider that the AGA version suffers from slowdown in overly busy scenarios, it reinforces the common belief that the more 'primitive' version is superior.
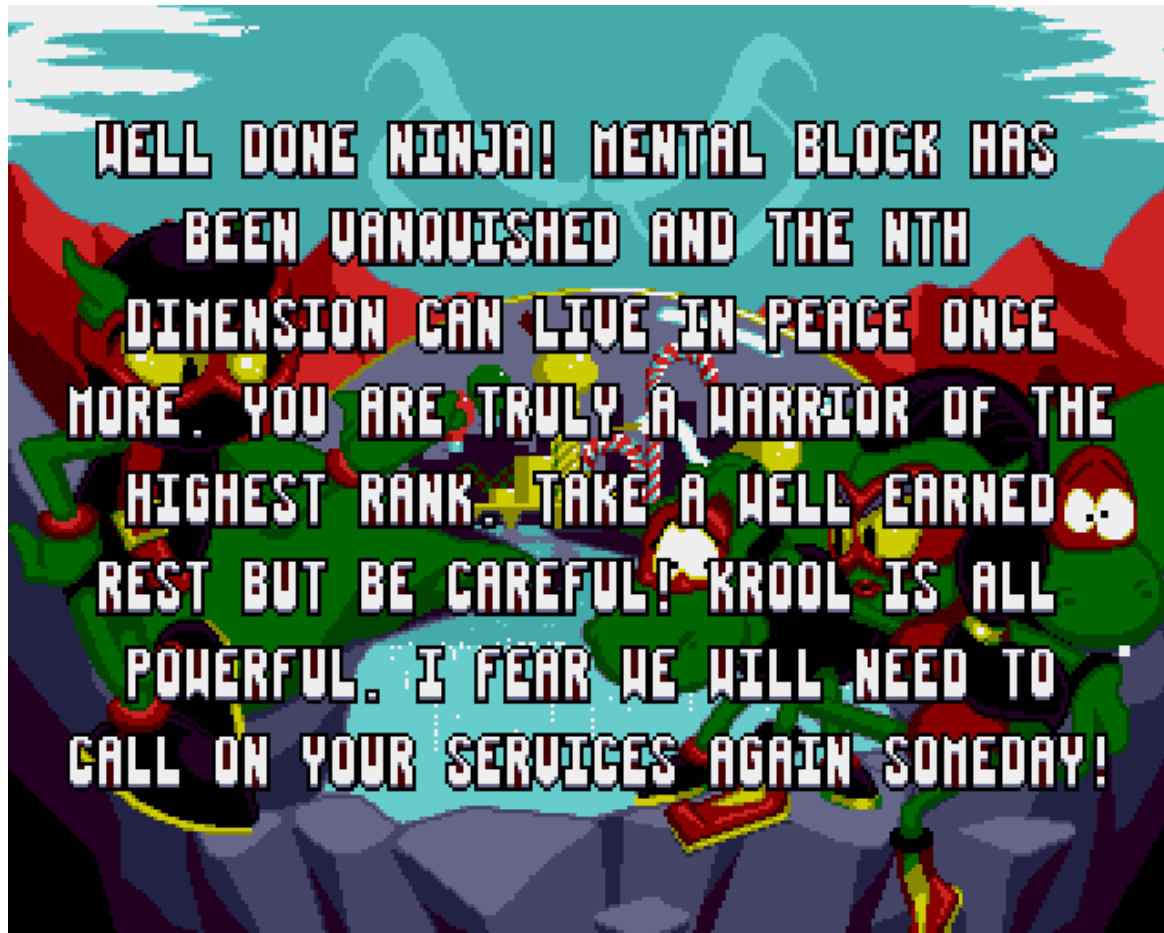
In Zool 2's finale sequence, the possibility of the ninja returning for a third junket is hinted at, though due to poor overall sales of the CD32 and the advent of Commodore's downfall, this never came to fruition. Plus... Doom *sigh*. Same old story...

In 2000, the Amiga version of Zool was re-released as part of 'The Best of Gremlin' compilation for the PC. Essentially it's the complete back catalogue of old-school Gremlin games on a single CD, though the Amiga games are merely ADF floppy images bundled with an emulator, rather than enhanced updates of any kind.

In the early noughties, a 3D 're-imagining' of Zool for the PlayStation 2 and GameCube was almost-nearly commissioned and released. Then canned at the 11th hour because the publisher, Zoo Digital, didn't appreciate the way the project was going. Data Design Interactive, its developers, decided to publish the game regardless, changing the theme and protagonist for copyright reasons. 'Ninjabread Man' was eventually released for the PlayStation 2 and Windows in 2005, and later on the Wii in 2007.

It was resolutely panned by the critics who dubbed it one of the worst games of all time... ever, ever, ever. You know, I don't think they liked it very much. First canned, then panned. Is there a *third* and final level of humiliation? Well, yes actually; they were declared defunct in 2009 having been hounded out of the game development business by the press for producing nothing but shovelware titles. Ouch!

In 2010, a book titled 'The Game Maker's Companion' was published along with an accompanying CD, on which you'll find all the files necessary to recreate Zool from scratch as a programming tutorial exercise.

In the book, Ade Carless himself takes you through the arduous challenge of bringing the game to life step by step using GameMaker Studio. It's a rare insight into the world of professional game development that would leave any coding wannabe Amigaphile frothing at the mouth, particularly if they

happen to be an ardent Zool fan. It's officially authorised by top bloke and Gremlin founder, Ian Stewart, licensed by his company, Urbanscan Ltd.

In 2011, Ian announced that he now owns the rights to all of Gremlin's classic Amiga game franchises dating back to the 80s, and intends to introduce them to the iOS platform via his new company, Urbanscan Ltd, under the 'Gremlin Presents' brand. Sadly, only Bounder's World has emerged so far.

A year prior to this, Ian ran a competition at Sheffield Hallam University offering students the opportunity to design a new Zool game that could potentially be adapted as a PlayStation Mini title. 'Steel Minions' emerged from the union; the university's in-house design studio assembled to provide workplace simulation experience to students. Their next-gen alien ninja game, 'Zool Planets', remains under development. Some fans held their breath in anticipation, and are now six feet under, so I wouldn't advise it.

There are even two *fictional* (sorry!) novels based on the series, entitled Cool Zool and Zool Rules, written by Stan Nicholls and Ian Edington in 1995. If the authors would like to sponsor me to read them, my rates are very reasonable, and I'd be totally comfortable wearing a novelty, felt Zool costume.

With Zool well and truly out of the picture by 1995, Epic MegaGames took a pop at the failed mascot via the enhanced CD release of their manic PC platformer, Jazz Jackrabbit. The wry Easter egg takes the form of a special edition antagonist known as 'Zoonik', who purely coincidentally I'm sure is the embodiment of a ninja hedgehog.

Perhaps an obscure reference to a long-forgotten mascot-wannabe from a defunct platform in an antiquated B-game Bucky O'Hare counterfeit succinctly encapsulates Zool's 'lasting' legacy.

Gremlin set out to make Zool "cooler than Mario, smarter than Sonic" (and even printed it verbatim in their adverts), though history reveals they wildly missed the mark on both counts. No-one likes being told what cool looks like. If something *is*, it speaks for itself.

In the meantime, the position of the 'One True, Bona Fide, Certified Amiga Mascot' remains vacant. One day... one day...